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Friends - Epistle of Counsel . 1835

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EPISTLE OF COUNSEL,

FROM THE

YEARLY MEETING

OF THE

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS,

HELD IN LONDON, 1835.

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YEARLY MEETING, 1835.

This Meeting in transmitting the accompanying Epistle of Counsel to the QUARTERLY and MONTHLY MEETINGS of GREAT BRITAIN and IRELAND, affectionately and earnestly recommends its contents to the close individual attention of all our Members.

To the QUARTERLY and MONTHLY MEETINGS of FRIENDS in GREAT BRITAIN and IRELAND.

DEAR FRIENDS,

IN thus conveying to you the result of some of the exercises into which we have been introduced at the present time, we feel bound to bear testimony, to the continued mercy and loving-kindness of the Lord. We have met under feelings of deep humiliation, and with fervent desires, that He might be pleased to own us

in being together. We reverently trust, that He hath heard our prayers: He hath been gracious unto us, and we offer unto Him the tribute of thanksgiving and praise.

We have been permitted unitedly to labour for the good of the Church, earnestly desiring that it may be purified from every defilement, and built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.¹

In looking back on our history, and the testimonies which we believe were given our forefathers to bear, we clearly recognize that larger view which they were brought to take of the spiritual offices of Christ, as the foundation of all which distinguished them from other Christian professors.

They were led to this view, through a deep conviction that man, in his natural state, is alienated from God by sin, and that without the removal of sin he cannot be restored to the divine favour. Through deep repentance toward God they came to a living faith in Christ, know-

¹ Eph. ii. 20.

ing him to dwell in them, to teach them, and to rule in them, and thus they found true peace to their seeking souls.

It was not as speculative doctrine, that they sought to propagate the Truth. They believed it had been much obscured during the long apostacy of the Christian church; that the authority of man had largely superseded the true spiritual authority of Christ, and that outward rites and signs of service had been substituted for the true allegiance of the heart to Him.

They were led no longer to trust in man in the exercise of acts of worship: its entire spirituality, the freedom of Gospel Ministry, the variety of gifts, and the liberty for their free exercise in the church under a measure of the Spirit of Christ, were truths which opened to their minds, and led them to meet in reverential silence for the worship of Almighty God in spirit and in truth. In thus assembling together they found the declaration to be fulfilled:—"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them;"¹ and under the convicting, en-

¹ Matt. xviii. 20.

lightening, strengthening, and comforting influence of his Spirit, they were often united in the fellowship of that life which is hid with Christ in God ; and there were raised up those, who, in these meetings, had to tell of what the Lord had done for their souls, and to offer living prayers and praises unto him : many ran to and fro, declaring the unsearchable riches of Christ ; and, though reviled and persecuted, they counted not their lives dear unto themselves that they might finish their course with joy, and the ministry which they had received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

Under the guidance of their spiritual Teacher they were led to see the contrariety of War and Oaths, to the peaceable and truth-speaking spirit of the Christian Religion ; and they received, without hesitation, the plain commands of Christ, —“Swear not at all ;”¹—“Resist not evil ;”²—“Love your enemies.”³

The simplicity of their personal attire, of their furniture, and of their address, was only what they believed a true conformity to Christ required

¹ Matt. v. 34.

² Matt. v. 39.

³ Matt. v. 44.

from them : often and feelingly did they declare that they affected no singularity, and imposed no mere human restraints ; that they had no pleasure in offending their neighbour, and no stoical indifference to personal suffering ; but that it was in the exercise of a good conscience towards God and man, that they were constrained to differ from others in these respects : and often did they declare, in being thus led to press the knowledge of Christ in his spiritual offices, that they continued in an unshaken faith in the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, as the only means through which we derive all spiritual blessings, and whereby alone we have the remission of sins. It was nothing short of the Gospel in its undivided fulness which they received and sought to propagate.

Whilst thus alluding to our predecessors in religious profession, we would earnestly but affectionately recommend to our dear friends generally, but especially to those in early life, the frequent and serious perusal of their writings ; replete as they are with instructive evidence of the sufficiency of that foundation upon which it was their

concern to build, and eminently calculated, as we believe they are, to impress the mind with a deep sense of the importance of the experimental work of religion on the heart.

Dear Friends ! amidst all our weaknesses in past and in present times, we feel assured, that, under the influence of the truths of the Gospel as held by us, sound practical piety, love to God and man, a humble faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit have been, and still are to be found amongst us. And we believe that, backsliding and rebellious as we acknowledge ourselves to have been, the Lord, through the power of his grace, has been pleased in great mercy to own us as a part of his heritage, and to enable us in some measure to bring forth fruits to his praise :—to Him be all the glory.

Brethren ! the testimonies of our fathers we know are in truth and sincerity dear to many of you. We know, however, that it is possible to hold heavenly doctrines in the head, whilst the heart is in the earth : that it is also possible to maintain them on merely traditional authority, with but little conviction on the understanding ;

and in times of trial and sifting, those who thus hold the faith are apt either to be led away with every wind of doctrine, or to support the Truth in the spirit of party.

It is good to be aroused from indifference, to be brought to think on the momentous subject of our immortal interests. But it is good also to remember that we are not to expect to discover the whole scope of divine truth at once,—that the things of God are only to be known by the Spirit of God.¹ It should never be forgotten that the end of all true religion is to change the heart, and to render us meet for the kingdom of heaven. If you have been convinced of sin, of the dark and lost condition of the natural man, O! humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and He will exalt you in due time. He who has begun a good work, the work of conviction, will, as the eye is kept single; unto Him, carry it on to conversion, and to true faith in Christ the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world: in Him you will find peace. You have however many lessons to learn in the school of Christ; and

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 10, 11.

these lessons are to be learned in the way of obedience. Be patient ; be watchful. Sure, though it may be slow, is the course of him who submits himself to the gradual unfoldings of Divine Wisdom ; and blessed are the privileges of the true scholar of Christ.

This is the course of experience to which our principles have ever led : and these principles, be it remembered, are, and are no other than, the principles of the religion of the Gospel of Christ. We believe it is in this course that Christianity, in its full and genuine import, is designed increasingly to lead its professors ; far away from the dry and barren hills of airy speculation, and the unstable sea of party-contention, to those green pastures and still waters of life, where Christ the good Shepherd gathers and feeds his flock.

Our hearts are at this time enlarged in love, and in an earnest desire for the preservation and growth of our religious body. Dear friends ! we hold to our ancient Christian testimonies on worship and ministry. Nothing has weakened our sense of the value of patient, reverent, silent

waiting upon God in religious assemblies ; in which we can enjoy that worship which is in spirit and in truth. Opportunities of this description have been owned by the immediate and powerful visitations of divine love ; and we trust we can, and do, hold our meetings for worship, though often in silence, to our own edification and the honour of the cause of Truth. We are anxious that whilst parents are diligent in instructing their children in the blessed truths of Holy Scripture, and concerned to commend them in prayer unto God, they may never allow any thing to escape their lips that would discourage their attendance of our meetings which may be held in silence. But rather, dear friends, be of a hopeful mind : we firmly believe that the great Head of the church has provided within our borders sufficient means, if individual faithfulness were maintained, for the instruction and spiritual improvement of your tender offspring.

A living, rightly authorized ministry has ever been a blessing to the church : our views on the nature and source of Gospel ministry have undergone no change. It is the prerogative of Christ

Jesus our Lord to choose and to put forth his own ministers. A clear apprehension of scripture doctrine, or a heart enlarged in love to others, are not of themselves sufficient for this work. Whatever may be the talents or scriptural knowledge of any, unless there be a necessity laid upon them, and a distinct call to the ministry, our society cannot acknowledge it: and except there be a sense of the renewed putting forth and quickening influence of the Holy Spirit, we believe it to be utterly unsafe to move in this office. O! that our dear friends who may be young in the ministry, may take heed to their steps, and keep apart from every thing that would draw them from their own exercises; and that they may be preserved in such a lowly, teachable mind, as to avail themselves of the counsel and encouragement of their more experienced friends. May the diffident and fearful, those who go trembling on their way, be strengthened and encouraged; and may all, both elder and younger, be concerned to minister only in the ability which God giveth.

We desire that none may despise the shortness or simplicity of any offerings in the ministry: and

that all may be careful not to indulge in a criticising spirit; much less in a disposition to cavil or to judge their brethren, or in controversy. Such things are highly injurious and unbecoming: they lead off from that individual watchfulness and knowledge of ourselves which are essential to a growth in grace, and they are opposed to the meekness and lowliness of a disciple of Christ. Light familiar conversation on the sacred truths of religion is also very dangerous. The more our young friends are engaged to dwell in true humility, that respect for age and experience which has ever characterized every well regulated community, both civil and religious, will evince itself. It was an injunction to Israel of old, and we regard it as a standing precept, "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God."¹

We have, many of us, at this time been led to call to mind the days of our early visitation with the day-spring from on high. We know that it was the power of the Lord which first brought us into reverent fear before Him; which was a swift

¹ Lev. xix. 32.

witness against sin, and brought us into deep sorrow because of our transgressions, and led us to ask forgiveness of God. We had in those days some hope that we had peace with Him, and we could have had no true peace but through Jesus Christ our Lord. We feel the value of a broken and a contrite spirit.

We offer these things, dear young friends, for your benefit. Cherish, we entreat you, a tender religious sensibility. Be sober-minded, and lowly of heart. Frequently retire alone to wait before the Lord, and, in deep prostration of soul, to ask for the renewings of the Holy Ghost. Believe in the reality of its sensible operations. A willing and true acceptance of this doctrine can never interfere with a just value for the whole truths of the Bible: on the contrary, it will render them more precious to you, and lead you to accept the blessed Gospel in its everlasting fulness.

We are exhorted to be subject one to another.¹ This submission has much tended to our preservation as a religious society. It was maintained to a great extent among the apostles; and yet in-

¹ 1 Peter v. 5.

dividual liberty was not infringed upon. It is good for us to submit to the judgment of the church; and a departure from this practice would lead into confusion. O ! that that bond of unity and true Christian fellowship which has been so long and so sweetly felt amongst us, may never be broken.

Dear friends, brethren, and sisters, beloved in the Lord, we are about to separate ; we trust under some sense of the love of Christ : may we all be found rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation ; continuing instant in prayer.

“ Now the God of peace, that brought again
 “ from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shep-
 “ herd of the sheep, through the blood of the
 “ everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every
 “ good work to do his will, working in you that
 “ which is well pleasing in his sight, through
 “ Jesus Christ ; to whom be glory for ever and
 “ ever. Amen.”²

Signed in and on behalf of the Yearly
 Meeting by

SAMUEL TUKE,
 Clerk.

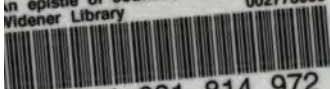
¹ Rom. xii. 12.

² Heb. xiii. 20, 21.

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